

Michigan Time Traveler

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KIDS' History

Pewabic Tiles

Look carefully in Michigan State University's Memorial Chapel, the lobby of Kedzie North, or Shaw Hall, to name a few . . . and you'll see beautiful tiles on the walls, around fireplaces and even on the floor. This month's Time Traveler takes you to their source—the Pewabic Pottery and its curious, inventive founder Mary Chase Perry Stratton.



Pewabic Pottery

Pewabic Pottery, located at 10125 E. Jefferson Avenue, Detroit, is a National Historic Landmark. Pewabic Pottery holds classes, workshops, lectures, internships and residency programs for potters and other artists. It offers educational opportunities for gifted and talented students of all ages. (State Historic Preservation Office)

Mary Chase Perry Stratton

I suppose the beginning of my idea . . . dates back to the time when as a little girl, near Lake Superior, I found clay which could be used for modeling and entertained myself by fashioning figures and designs, which were later fired in a brick yard, much to my delight. I loved working with clay but I wanted art with color, too. As my training had been in design and clay modeling, ceramics seemed the right answer for me.

—Mary Chase Perry Stratton

Mary Chase Perry was born in 1867 in Hancock, Michigan, in copper mining country in the Upper Peninsula. When she was ten, she moved to Detroit. At twenty, she went to study china painting and sculpture at the Art Academy in Cincinnati, Ohio.

She returned to Detroit. Her next-door neighbor, Horace Caulkins, was a dentist. He had invented a kiln to heat clay to make dentures—false teeth made from porcelain.

In an interview in the *Detroit News* in 1932, Mary Perry said, "I was trying to decide what I wanted to do, and had gone to spend a week at the lake shore to think the thing over. A paper fluttered along the beach and I picked it up.

There was an article printed on it headed 'Develop the Resources of America.' The article outlined the rich possibilities in our own soil for making the clays for pottery. Ever since I have been trying to develop the resources of America by using the clays found in our soil."

Perry asked Caulkins to make her a kiln for firing ceramics—vases, lamps and bottles. They partnered with each other and opened the "Stable Workshop" in an abandoned stable in 1903. There, they sold their Revelation Pottery. Perry traveled around the country demonstrating the kiln. She also experimented with glazes to apply to her pottery.

Perry and Caulkins then hired William Buck Stratton to build a new pottery to make and sell tiles. Perry and Stratton married eleven years later. Mary Chase Perry Stratton's Pewabic tiles became popular all over Michigan and the United States. They were used in schools, libraries, museums, monuments and churches.

Mary Chase Perry Stratton died when she was 94 years old in 1961. Her birthday is March 15.



Mary Chase Perry in her ceramics studio, 1905 (State Historic Preservation Office)



Pewabic tiles surround the fireplace in the Michigan Historical Museum's 1930s Gallery.

Discovering a Glaze

For many years, Mary Chase Perry experimented with glazes—liquids applied to clay then heated at high temperatures to form a hard surface. She was looking for mineral combinations that became iridescent—looking like glass reflecting rainbows.

In 1909, Perry discovered a special glaze. Bertha O'Brien wrote in the *Detroit Free Press*, "Mary Chase Perry, Detroit's famous potter, drew with trembling fingers and sparkling eyes from the oven of her big kiln one of the most beautiful pieces of iridescent pottery that ever ravished the eyes of a beauty lover.

"It was a dramatic moment. . . . One little piece in all the dozens that Miss Perry had put through the same process, subjected to the same quality and quantity of heat—only that one little piece came out glistening with myriad tints in the sunlight—all the rest were lead, leaden, lifeless shapes of clay."

Perry applied glazes to her tiles in different colors—rose, green gold, purple and copper. She named her pottery "Pewabic." That means copper-colored clay in the Chippewa language. She chose the name after a mine called Pewabic in her hometown in the Upper Peninsula.

"Whenever my father was free from his doctor's duties we'd walk there [to the mine] together. I loved the name for itself and took it. Only later did I discover how right it was for the pottery."

Over time, Perry systematized the production of glazed tiles and manufactured them in large quantities. They were used for floors, ceilings, walls, fountains, mosaics and other architectural features.

Today, the Pewabic Pottery potters can reproduce some of her glazes, but not all of them. She did not leave recipes for everything she did. And today we know that some of the glazes are too poisonous to use. Today, other artists are developing recipes for new glazes at Pewabic Pottery.



Children from Winans Elementary School in the Waverly Public Schools examine Pewabic tiles in front of the 1920s movie theater at the Michigan Historical Museum.



Making Tiles

To make a ceramic tile, first make a flat piece of clay. Then use a rubber mallet to pound it into a plaster mold that has the inverse of the design you want to make.

Over the next few hours, the clay will shrink as the plaster mold absorbs the moisture from it. You then need to remove the tile from the mold and rest it on a rack to dry

some more. The clay needs to be completely dry before you place it in the huge kiln to cook—otherwise, it can explode. It takes a week or two for the clay to dry completely. While baking in the kiln, the molded clay will transform into hard clay—called bisque.

The last step is to glaze the tile. You apply the glaze, as you would apply paint. Then you need to fire (bake) the tile again. The high heat in the kiln creates a chemical reaction that causes the surface of the tiles to look like glass.

Why didn't Mary Chase Perry write recipes for glazes?

On three separate occasions, Mary Chase Perry said:

Let them discover their own. I had to do it that way and it is the only way.

Each artist owes it to himself to develop his own formulae. Only in this way will ceramics continue to grow as an art form.

Once you discover something on your own it really belongs to you. You can't discover anything important by copying.

Things To Do

- ◆ At www.michiganhistory.org, tour the Great Depression Gallery and the 1920s Gallery. Then go to *Kids' Stuff* and *Teachers' Stuff*.
- ◆ Comments or suggestions? Write to timetraveler@michigan.gov.
- ◆ Visit the Pewabic Pottery, the Detroit Zoological Park, the Belle Isle Aquarium Zoo, Cranbrook Educational Community, the Detroit Institute of Arts, Michigan State University and the Children's Room at the Detroit Public Library to see Pewabic tiles.
- ◆ Go to Mary Chase Perry's birthday party at Pewabic Pottery, March 13 and meet the author and illustrator of *FIRE MAGIC, Detroit's Pewabic Pottery Treasures* by Marcy Heller Fisher, illustrated by Marjorie Hecht Simon. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2003. If you can't go, read the book.

At the Michigan Historical Museum

Visit the Great Depression Gallery and the 1920s Gallery to see Pewabic tiles.

The Michigan Historical Museum is located two blocks west of the Capitol in downtown Lansing. Museum admission is free. Hours: Monday-Friday: 9 a.m.- 4:30 a.m.; Saturday: 10 a.m.-4:00 p.m.; Sunday: 1-5 p.m. Telephone hotline: (517) 373-3559. Visit the Michigan Historical Museum's Web site: www.michiganhistory.org.



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